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SUBJECT: LAVROV'S VISIT TO RIGA

Classified By: Charge d'affaires a.i. Stuart M. Seldowitz. Reasons: 1. 4 (b and d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Russian FM Lavrov's December 18 visit to Riga was most notable in that it occurred at all. After months of work, his visit marked the first ever visit by a Russian or Soviet FM to an independent Latvia. The highlight was the exchange of instruments of ratification on the Latvia-Russia border treaty, but agreements were also signed on pension issues and protection of grave sights. The visit with without vitriol and the Latvians were pleased as the business-like nature of the visit. Lavrov also brought an invitation for President Zatlers to visit Moscow, but the Latvians want some substance behind it before they will agree to the visit. Notably missing from the dialogue was any significant discussion of energy issues. End summary.

¶12. (C) Russian FM Lavrov visited Riga December 18, the first FM visit from Moscow to an independent Latvia (either before or after the Soviet occupation). We received readouts from Peteris Ustubs, foreign policy advisor to then PM Kalvitis, Edgars Skuja, MFA U/S for bilateral issues, Ilgvars Klava, MFA political director, and Valentin Ovsyannikov, DCM of the Russian Embassy in Riga. All described the tone of the visit as positive and Ustubs noted that Lavrov and Latvian FM Riekstins seemed to develop a good personal rapport, including during an extended one on one meeting.

Bilateral Issues

¶13. (C) The highlight of the visit was the exchange of instruments of ratification of the Latvia-Russia border treaty. The treaty provides for establishment of a final border between the two countries that recognizes changes made during the Soviet occupation of Latvia. Skuja said that next step would be to create a commission to formally demarcate the border and he hoped this would happen in early 2008. Skuja and Ustubs expressed appreciation for the Department's statement in support of the treaty.

¶14. (C) A major topic of discussion during the visit was the opening of an additional border crossing point and how to ease the back log of trucks at the existing crossing points. The two sides agreed to open a new crossing point at Opuli/Mogili in 2008, with the Intergovernmental Commission working on modalities. According to the Latvians, Lavrov assailed the European Commission for various delays to instituting an electronic "pre-declaration" system at Russian's EU borders and said that commission bureaucracy was to blame for the long truck lines.

¶15. (C) The two sides also signed agreements on pension issues and protection of burial sites. Both had been under discussion for some time. According to Ovsyannikov, the pension agreement provides credit for work done in one country for people who receive their pension from the other. The burial site agreement will obligate both sides to locate, mark and ensure protection of grave sites. Ovsyannikov

implied that this is actually more work for Russia, as many sites in Latvia are already known and marked but Latvian graves in Russia, especially from WWI and the Russian Revolution, are not as well identified and maintained. Skuja said that the Latvian side expressed hope that a number of other pending agreements, including on investment protection and double taxation, could be signed in the near future.

16. (C) Lavrov brought an invitation from Putin for President Zatlers to visit Moscow in 2008, but Skuja termed it "unofficial." Both Skuja and Ovsyannikov said that there would need to be substance for the trip to proceed, with both suggesting signing of some of the outstanding agreements as an example. Lavrov also confirmed that the Russian PM would attend the summit meeting of the Council of Baltic Sea states in Riga in June 2008 and joked that the Latvians could begin putting Putin's name on the official documents for the event.

Both Ustubs and Skuja said that Latvia would attempt to get a bilateral portion to that visit as well, should it indeed occur.

17. (C) The Latvians were pleased that Lavrov's tone on historical issues and the status of the ethnic Russian community in Latvia was "forward leaning and constructive." Ovsyannikov said Lavrov suggested that the sides put historical differences aside and concentrate on practical steps to improve relations. In his meetings, Lavrov was factual and specifically suggested steps to ease naturalization requirements for children of non-citizens born in Latvia and those over 55, and allowing non-citizens to vote in local elections. According to Ustubs, Lavrov took careful notes when Kalvitis explained that there was a simplified procedure for the children of non-citizens born in Latvia to acquire Latvian citizenship. The one difference between the sides we heard was on research into historical

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issues. The Latvians say that they asked for greater access for Latvian researchers to Russian archives for scholarly work on the inter-war period and the Soviet occupation. They claim that the Russians countered by proposing a joint historical commission to write a definitive history of those periods, but the Latvians refused, saying they could not cede an issue of national identity to such a commission.

Ovsyannikov, in contrast, told us that the commission was agreed and said he viewed it as a positive step.

International Issues

18. (C) Discussion on international issues followed expected patterns. The Latvians were a bit surprised by the strident tone Lavrov took on EU issues, though. After raising concerns on the commission and border crossings, he expressed frustration that many member states take their bilateral issues with Russia and import them to the EU. He cited the PCA and Polish meat and British demands for the extraction of Lugovoi as examples. He said that the PCA should not become a "Christmas tree" of bilateral issues and added that Russia saw "no need to rush" on getting a new partnership agreement with the EU. On the WTO, all Latvian sources said that Lavrov said that Russia was not interested in membership "at any cost" and that they would negotiate for one more year. If agreement was not reached in that time, Russia would "dismantle" the agreements made to date to facilitate its WTO accession.

19. (C) On Kosovo, according to Ustubs, Lavrov said that Russia was not worried about the precedent for places like South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but rather for internal locations in Russia. He also asked why there should be a hurry to resolve its status and asserted that 1244 would lapse if Kosovo declared independence. The Latvians say they pushed back on that point.

110. (C) On Iran, Lavrov said that the shipment of nuclear fuel from Russia gave it some leverage over the program.

Ovsyannikov claimed that Russian law mandated that the fuel shipments stop if the program is discovered to be military rather than civilian in nature or if the IAEA is denied access to Iranian nuclear facilities. Skuja reported that Lavrov argued that Iranian support for terrorism and development of a nuclear program should be examined and addressed separately, which the surprised the Latvians.

¶11. (C) Regarding CFE, the Latvians said that Lavrov, as he had done in a July meeting with then-FM Pabriks, assured them that while Baltic accession to the CFE regime was an issue, Russia did not view it as a bilateral issue and it would remain in multilateral fora for discussion. The Latvians raised the OSCE and the need for Russia to invite a full ODIHR team for Presidential elections. According to Ovsyannikov, Lavrov responded that Russia was being held to a higher standard and that the US, for example, had no plan for full observation of elections in its country. He also explained that Russia would not except observers from organizations of which it is not a member (i.e., the EU).

¶12. (C) Comment: That the visit happened at all was its most important feature and allowed the Kalvitis government, which placed a particular emphasis on normalizing relations with Moscow, to leave office on a high note. That the discussions were substantive, productive and largely free of the contentious rhetoric that has marked previous discussions is an important signal that the two countries can use their improved relations to address substantive issues constructively. The difference in understanding on the historical commission could cause some friction, but if that is the most contentious issue from the visit it is, in fact, another positive sign. The Latvians are happy with the invitation for Zatlars but will want to make sure the visit makes sense. We assess that their likely calculus is that it is better to have a substantive visit later, even after 2008, than rush to have a milquetoast visit by the end of January. The lack of any discussion of energy, though, is concerning. Combined with Latvia's rejection of the "gazprom clause" in recent EU energy debates, it is evidence that even with improved relations, the economic dependence on Russian energy will have a significant impact on Latvian policy.

SELDOWITZ